

Full Text of A K Ramanujan Memorial Lecture 2012 by Girish Karnad

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A K RAMANUJAN MEMORIAL LECTURE

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Let me say what a great honour it is for me to be here to deliver the First A.K. Ramanujan Memorial Lecture. He was a distinguished poet, both in Kannada and English, a folklorist, an ethnographer. He was among the first of Indian thinkers to take a serious look at oral tales, lullabies, proverbs, songs, in fact, at the richness of the world of women. He was a much acclaimed translator from Tamil and Kannada. I have no expertise in any of these fields. My claim to fame ---and certainly the reason why I have accepted the invitation to deliver this lecture---is that I knew him closely from the days when he was still unknown. He worked as a Junior Lecturer in a town called Belgaum when he was 27 years old, when I was a 16-year old student in Dharwad, about 48 miles away---a distance which seemed enormous in those days. Besides, he taught English Literature and I was a student of Mathematics. I never attended a single class conducted by him in my whole life. Although we were separated by such a distance and by our different disciplines, we met at InterCollegiate events and I tried to make the most of these opportunities, because he was always stimulating on the various enterprises he was engaged in and never at a loss for subjects or words. He loved teaching and I treated him as my guru. Regardless of where we met, in restaurants, in parks, on railway platforms or while waiting for the bus, he would deliver impromptu lectures and I listened avidly, and this process continued throughout my life.

Apart from his vibrant presence, I think what impressed me most was the fact that his poems used to get published in the ‘Illustrated Weekly of India’, a journal found in every middle-class home those days, and my ambition was to go to Britain and become internationally famous as an English poet, shine in the company of Eliot and Auden and Yeats. Of all the people I knew, he was the only person at ease in that world and with that aspiration.

[One day it dawned on me that while I was capable of writing plays, I would never make a poet. I just didn't have it in me. I was so broken hearted, I almost wept.]

THE POET

So let me start with his poetry; it was his strength as a first-rate poet in English that provided the basis for his extraordinary achievement in the field of translation. ‘Only a poet can translate a poet,’ he used to say. He knew that he was one---and a good one.

In those days Indians who wrote poetry in English used a kind of antequated nineteenth-century idiom and vocabulary, heavily influenced by the mediocre Victorian poets, who provided the staple for the English curriculum. My teacher, Professor V.K.Gopal had received a congratulatory First in English at Oxford and was venerated in India for his command of English. His poem on Lokmanya Tilak went (I quote from memory):

The great Maratha warrior

With a Pugree on his head

Woke up the Nation

When it was almost dead.

Raman reacted violently against that kind of writing, and used, in his poetry, a live contemporary idiom. And he dealt with intense personal problems. In that sense, he belonged to the generation of Nissim Ezekiel who cleansed Indian poetry of Victorian deadwood. I shall read out to you only one poem of Raman’s and then leave it at that.

The poem is called ‘Still Another View of Grace’. But I think it is about what happened to him when he left the claustrophobic, segregated and puritanical society in which he was brought up in India, to be launched on a life of sexual freedom, devoid of social constraints but fraught with indefinable anxieties and fears, in the West.

Still Another View of Grace

I burned and burned. But one day I turned

and caught that thought

by the screams of her hair and said: ‘Beware.

Do not follow a gentleman’s morals

with that absurd, determined air.

Find a priest. Find any beast in the wind

for a husband. He will give you a houseful

of legitimate sons. It is too late for sin,

even for treason. And I have no reason to know your kind.

Bred Brahmin among singers of shivering hymns

I shudder to the bone at hungers that roam the street

beyond the constable’s beat.’ But there She stood

upon that dusty road on a nightlit april mind

and gave me a look. Commandments crumbled

in my father’s past. Her tumbled hair suddenly known

as silk in my angry hand, I shook a little

and took her, behind the laws of my land.

THE FOLKLORIST

But while I admired Raman’s poetry, in my college days I was baffled and confused by the other activities he indulged in, which I used to shrug off as eccentricities. He collected oral tales. ‘In my twenties,’ he writes, ‘I collected tales from anyone who would tell me one: my mother, servants, aunts, men and women in villages with whom I stayed when I was invited to lecture in

local schools, schoolteachers and schoolchildren, carpenters and tailors. I wrote them down by hand.I had no idea of what to do with them....I was just entranced by them.'

Apart from oral tales, he had built up a collection of Kannada proverbs and even written a small book analyzing them, which was published by the University. He used to collect swear-words and abuses and try to understand their social significance. Besides he had started to translate *vacanas*, poems written in Kannada by Veershaiva poets in the eleventh century, which in my those days were generally denigrated as religious verse of no poetic worth.

In 1959, he got a Fullbright Scholarship to Indiana and became a student of Linguistics. It was in the US that he realized that all these fields which he was exploring as hobbies had already been studied seriously as academic disciplines by European and American scholars. For instance, he was totally unaware that folklore was a much developed field of study and that many scholars had already collected and classified oral tales of their regions and numbered them. As he confesses, 'I ... did not know for a long time that there were international indexes of types and motifs, marked with numbers....I discovered these folktale indexes when I accidentally met an American folklorist.'

There are of course several distinguished folklorists in India. Vijay Dan Detha is a well-known examples. But Raman brought a new focus to his data. Oral tales are narrated on different occasions in different contexts, but the context that had been totally ignored even by Indian scholars until then was the kitchen.

It is in the kitchen, while feeding the children in the evening, that stories are often narrated. The adult males are not present when the children are fed: they are served separately, much later. The oldest boy present in the kitchen is not likely to be older than eight or nine. And the other occupants of the kitchen are all female members of the family, of all ages. Thus although the story is aimed at some sleepy or obstreperous child, there is an audience of female members listening to the telling. Inevitably, the tale becomes a network of messages between those present. On a particular evening, the teller ---who is usually the senior member of the family although never the *mater familias*---may even choose a tale to comment, however obliquely, on something that has happened earlier in the house. More significantly, the tale resonates within a world of women, barred to men, which thus reflects the values, sufferings, aspirations and fantasies of women.

The tales roughly fall into two categories, those which have a male protagonist and those which are about a woman. Tales with male protagonists will normally narrate how the hero pursues glory and success, and gets the girl as the prize at the end. These tales usually end in marriage. More interesting are the women-centred tales. These mainly fall into two categories, depending on at what stage in the tale the girl gets married. There are tales where marriage occurs halfway through the tale, and in such narratives, the protagonist has to suffer incestuous attention from the father or the brother before her marriage and from members of the husband's family after.

Then there are tales which start with the girl's marriage. She then loses her husband (either to misfortune, to a courtesan, or to the machinations of in-laws). All over the world we find tales in which right at the start of the tale, the female protagonist meets her love and then loses him. One famous example is of course Cinderella. But in the West they usually get married at the end and live happily ever after. In India, many of these tales start with a marriage and then the girl loses her husband. The rest of the story then is concerned with how she gets him back. Veena Oldenburg, the sociologist, once told me that whenever she asks village women in Punjab to talk about themselves, they invariably start with '*mera biah huwa*' (My marriage took place and then...).

But the distinguishing feature of all these oral tales is that in them it is the women who have the energy, wisdom, foresight and cunning to save their men. The men are 'wimps', only too susceptible to control by other women, usually mothers, courtesans or in-laws. Ultimately, it is the woman's enterprise that saves the marriage. It is a world where women are firmly in charge.

In the classical tale, Sita, Savitri and Draupadi are chaste, devoted to their husbands. In oral tales, women cheat, take on lovers. Adulteresses triumph.

Raman also draws our attention to how these stories, often narrated by illiterate women, have a complex aesthetics informing them, a consistent philosophical attitude to the craft of telling tales. Thus there are tales which are about telling tales.

Here is one such tale:

A housewife knew a story. She also knew a song. But she kept them to herself, never told anyone the story or sung the song.

Imprisoned within her, the story and the song were feeling choked. They wanted release, wanted to run away. One day, when she was sleeping with her mouth open, the story escaped, fell out of her, took the shape of a pair of shoes and sat outside the house. The song also escaped, took the shape of something like a man's coat, and hung on a peg.

The woman's husband came home, looked at the coat and the shoes, and asked her, 'Who is visiting?'

'No one,' she said.

'But whose coat and shoes are those?'

'I don't know,' she replied.

He wasn't satisfied with her answer. [So they had a fight.] The husband flew into a rage, picked up his blanket and went to the Monkey God's temple to sleep.....

All the lamp flames of the town, once they were put out, used to come to the Monkey God's temple and spend the night there, gossiping. On this night, all the lamps of all the houses were represented there---except one, which came late.

The others asked the latecomer, 'Why are you so late tonight?'

'At our house, the couple quarreled late into the night,' said the flame.

'Why did they quarrel?'

'When the husband wasn't home, a pair of shoes came onto the verandah, and a man's coat somehow got on to a peg. The husband asked her whose they were. The wife said she didn't know. So they quarreled.'

'Where did the coat and shoes come from?'

'The lady of our house knows a story and a song. She never tells the story, and has never sung the song to anyone. The story and the song got suffocated inside; so they got out and have turned into a coat and a pair of shoes. They took revenge. The woman doesn't even know.'

The husband, lying under the blanket in the temple, heard the lamp's explanation. His suspicions were cleared. When he went home, it was dawn. He asked his wife about her story and her song. But she had forgotten both of them. 'What story, what song?' she said.

I have picked this tale because it was Raman's favourite. He places it at the beginning of his collection of oral tales, 'The Flowering Tree'. It's also my favourite. I think its imagery is simply beautiful and I have used it as the *prastavana*, the prologue, in my play, 'Naga-Mandala'.

It also clearly states certain beliefs in our folk culture. Firstly, the flames don't get extinguished at night; when they are put out, they simply move from home to temple, and return to the wicks when the lamps are lit again next evening. Nothing in nature is ever totally extinguished.

Secondly, the story makes certain statements about stories. For instance, where does a story live? A Western child may believe that a story lives in a book, ideally beautifully illustrated by someone like Arthur Rackham. In Indian folklore, a story lives inside the teller, literally, physically inside. And it is his or her duty to pass it on. If the teller fails to pass on this story to some listener, the story will take its revenge and she (it is almost certainly likely to be a woman) will suffer punishment.

There are some things you cannot keep to yourself. Food, a daughter, a story. You must circulate them. A story is not merely for entertainment; it has an important social function. If you don't circulate it you are not doing your social duty.

But story-telling has another, equally important purpose: the good health of the story teller.

In another story, a woman has complaints against her daughters in-law, but she will not give vent to them and so her stomach bloats up. It's only when she shouts out her anguish to the skies, that she regains her normal shape. The bloated tummy recedes.

Already we are dealing with an aesthetics which is different from the Western. According to Aristotle, catharsis is an experience which the audience undergoes. The purgation of emotions liberates the listener. According to the aesthetics of the Indian oral tale, as A.K. Ramanujan points out in this and many other examples, it is the narrator, the artist whose well-being is at stake. He must tell the tale for his own sake.

THE TRANSLATOR

I have already mentioned that while Raman was collecting tales in his youth, he was also translating 11th century Kannada vacanas. In 1962, Raman had just moved from Indiana to the University of Chicago. And on one of his Saturdays there, he entered the basement stack of the Harper Library looking for an old Tamil grammar and stumbled upon an early anthology of classical Tamil poems, called ‘Sangam’ poetry. ‘I sat down there on the floor between the stacks and began to browse. To my amazement, I found the prose commentary.... unlocked the old poems for me...I was enthralled by the beauty and subtlety of what I could read. Here was a world, a part of my language and culture, to which I had been an ignorant heir.’

This is what is fascinating about Ramanujan’s intellectual growth to me. He goes abroad, and discovers the significance of the oral material he was collecting in India, and goes on to analyze with clarity areas he had only vaguely grasped here. In Chicago, he discovers the Indian past he was totally unaware of when he was back home.

Ramanujan set about translating the ancient Tamil poems. What ultimately emerged as ‘Poems of Love and War’ in 1985, along with his translations of the medieval Kannada vacanas, ‘Speaking of Siva,’ established him as probably the greatest Indian translator of the twentieth century.

I am aware I am treading dangerous territory. One has to be careful when using superlatives like ‘the greatest’, so let me explain what I mean.

Most translators translate works which have already been acknowledged as works of literary or philosophical merit by tradition, works such as the Upanishads, the Shakuntalam, the Bhagavad Gita, or the Dashakumaracarit. Raman brought to light entire bodies of work which were previously unknown to the world outside. Vacanas were unknown outside Karnataka and I had never heard of Sangam literature although I grew up in the state neighbouring Tamilnadu. The other surprise for the Indological scholars of the mid-century was that the literature he brought to light was not in Sanskrit but in Tamil and Kannada. Most scholars in those days, even in India, were unaware of classical literature outside Sanskrit. The world marveled that there should be literature of such high order lying undiscovered in India, and that too in languages other than Sanskrit.

Secondly, most translators take pains to declare that the material they are dealing with is, in the original language, great poetry, but their translations themselves give no hint of any poetry or

beauty. Most translations leave the reader wondering what was so worthy of attention in the works presented and often encourage a dismissive attitude which attributes the panegyrics to linguistic chauvinism. This is often so because the translator is not creative in English, the translation is so wooden that it does not convince you that the original could be poetry of high order. Raman's translations, on the other hand, display such sensitivity to the English language that one needs no further protestations of the poetic merit of the original. His versions are delightful and move you even in their English avatars.

I cannot resist referring here to an essay by Tejaswini Niranjana in which she criticizes Raman's methodology and even questions his knowledge of Kannada. Then she goes on to offer a translation of her own to show how the vacana, translated by AKR, could have been better translated. Dear oh dear! The result is a thundering proof of Ramanujan's axiom that, 'Only a poet can translate a poem.'

On the other hand, I should mention Kamil Zvelebil of the Netherlands, who plagiarized wholesale Raman's translations of the vacanas and published them as his own. Even the title of his book of translations, 'The Lord of the Meeting Rivers', is stolen from Raman.

Thirdly, Raman does something which few translators do: he explains to us why he has translated as he has done. He gives us a theory. He tries to establish that the words, phrases and equivalents he has used in his versions are not random. Each usage has been carefully thought out.

To relish the beauty and subtlety of Raman's theory of translations, you have to go to the introductions he has written to his collections. There is no space here to even summarize them but I shall just give a sample.

Medieval texts were written without any punctuation, without capitals or paragraphs, with no spaces dividing words or phrases. The words were written solidly one after another. Modern scholars while typesetting them have to break these solid blocks of letters into separate words or sentences, using modern conventions. The original poems were meant only for recitation and not reading. Raman argues that when you put them on the page now, they get a visual shape and it is the translator's job to respond visually to the aural form of the original. He has, he says, tried 'explicit typographic approximation to what I thought of was the INNER FORM of the poem.' Let me quote an example he gives of this method:

What She Said;

Bigger than earth, certainly,
higher than the sky,
more unfathomable than the waters
is this love for this man
of the mountain slopes
where bees make rich honey
from the flowers of the kurinci
that has such black stalks.

[Raman points out how the visual form of the poem starts with the whole wide universe and then spirals down to the sharp points of the stalks of Kurici flower.]

A good translation doesn't merely put into English what is there in the original Kannada or Tamil. Such a straight-forward transposition is often simply impossible. Often it illuminates the entire cultural context or even the debate that has given rise to the poem. The translator has to interpret. He needs to explicate.

ULLAVARU SHIVALAYA VA MAADUVARU,

NAANENU MAADALI, BADA VANAIYYA.

The rich
will make temples for Siva.

What shall I,
a poor man,
do?

My legs are pillars,
the body the shrine,
the head a cupola
of gold.

Listen, O lord of meeting rivers,
things standing shall fall,
but the moving shall ever stay.

[Raman explains how in the original the same Kannada verb ‘maadu’ occurs twice ---in each of the first two lines in the first stanza. But English offers him two alternatives for ‘maadu’, ‘make’ and ‘do’, and the meaning of the whole poem would change depending which one was used. Raman departs from the original in using ‘make’ in the first sentence and ‘do’ in the second.]

THE ETHNOGRAPHER (?)

But nothing remains disparate and unconnected in Raman’s thought, and one day he realizes with a shock the connection between the Kannada oral tales and the world of Tamil Sangam poems. His essay, ‘Two Realms of Kannada Folklore,’ begins with the line: ‘Returning to Kannada folklore after several years of studying classical Tamil poetry, I saw a particularly simple and striking pattern I had not seen before.’ This movement from ancient Tamil to kitchen Kannada, from classical to the folklore, from a received system to improvised data is characteristic of Raman and so is his amazing sensitivity to repeated patterns, reflections, hidden connections in disparate disciplines---linguistics, folklore, poetry, translations and a dabbler’s fascination for psychiatry.

All classical Tamil poetry is classified by themes into two kinds : *akam* and *puram*. ‘Akam’ (pronounced ‘aham’) means interior, ‘puram’ means exterior. The ‘akam’ poems are love poems . They contain no names or individuals or place-names. The dramatis personae there are merely referred to as ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘her friend’, or ‘his friend’. ‘Puram’, the so-called public poetry, has ‘names, places, expression of personal circumstance in a real society, in a real history...’ They have detailed descriptions which the akam poems lack.

A typical akam poem reads:

As a little white snake
with lovely stripes on its young body
troubles the jungle elephant
this slip of a girl
her teeth like sprouts of new rice

her wrists stacked with bangles
troubles me.

A typical puram poem reads:

Enemies,
take care
when you enter
the field of battle
and face
our warrior [Pari]

who is like a chariot wheel
made thoughtfully over a month
by a carpenter
who tosses off eight chariots
in a day.

Or

Pari's Parampu hill
is quite a place.

Even if all three of you kings should surround it with your great drums of war
Remember it has four things not grown under the plows of plowmen:

One, wild rice grows in the tiny-leaved bamboos;
Two, ripening jackfruit , crammed with segments of sweet flesh,
Three , down below grow sweet potatoes under fat creepers;
Four, beehives break as their colours ripen to a purple, and the rich tall hill drips with honey;

Even if you have elephants tied to every tree there,
And chariots standing in every field,
You will never take the hill.

He will not yield to the sword.
But I know a way to take it:
Pick carefully your lute strings, string little lutes,
And with your dancing girls with dense fragrant hair behind you
Go singing and dancing to Pari,

And he will give you both hill and country.

What Ramanujan realized was that this akam-puram classification had a relevance beyond Tamil classical poetry. It also enabled one to identify the various transformations undergone by the tales, as they move from orality in the kitchen to public performance.

When a tale is narrated in the kitchen, for instance, no character or place is named. Locations are not described in detail. The protagonists are simply described as ‘the king’, ‘the washerman’, or ‘the old woman’. Such stories begin without naming the characters, as in ‘Long long ago a king ruled a city and he had three daughters,’ and then continue to refer to the daughters merely as ‘the eldest’, ‘the middle one’ or ‘the youngest’, without naming them.

Now the same tale may form the basis of a *vrtakatha* (ritual tale), explaining the point of some ritual, such as the Satya-narayana vrata or the Vata-savitri vrata, which is performed in the courtyard and is an occasion to which outsiders, like neighbours or relations living at a distance, are normally invited. Here the story has a purpose, a *phalasruti* (statement of the results to be achieved by the ritual), such as a child, or bridegroom for the unmarried daughter. The main characters often have proper names.

Then again you may find the same tale providing the plot for a ballad recited in the street or it may inspire an epic poet, whose opus will in course of time be recorded and studied as a classic text. In such a bardic version, all the characters have names. Cities are named, described and differentiated. The various streets form a part of the story. Actions become larger than life.

I mentioned earlier that a very common pattern found in a woman’s tale told in the kitchen is that the girl gets married at the beginning of the tale and then loses her husband. In the kitchen, she is often nameless. But we find the same tale gathering details as it is used for narration outside. There is a famous play called Sadarame in Karnataka where the play starts with Sadarame losing her husband and going in search of him and finding him through sheer grit. She even lives

dressed as a man and shares a thief's house. Stories which have become part of the classical lore, like that of Shakuntala, Savitri and Damayanti, have the same basic pattern. And if one were to see the Ramayana from Sita's point of view, this is what happens to her as well. She enters the story with her marriage to Rama and then is separated from him. Thus the kitchen tale is like an akam poem, simple, unadorned, nameless. Its recounting as a ballad or as an epic, is full of details and philosophical explanations, characteristic of puram poetry.

The kitchen tale has no causality. Events just happen, one after another, and have no rational connection. In a story collected by Raman, a crow keeps bothering a nubile girl with the question, 'Shall I come at twenty or shall I come at seventy?' She says 'Come at twenty' and all her troubles begin at that age. There is no attempt to explain what the crow represents and what the choice means.

In the epic, everything is causally related. Even the past lives of the characters come into play. The crow there would be someone the girl knew and had some kind of a dramatic relationship in a previous birth. There a formal philosophy of life, a sanctioned set of beliefs and attitudes provides the underpinning for the work.

Technology too enters the picture as you move from the domestic to the public domain. 'A domestic teller uses no props---her voice is her only instrument. As we move towards the puram end, the props which the bard uses for a public performance increase...' He uses accompanyists, songs, musical instruments and costumes.

'Theatre, the endpoint in the continuum, is the most "puram, exterior or public" of the genres.'

Ramanujan applies the *akam-puram*, or domestic-public, spectrum to many other genres: riddles for instance are used by children at homes and proverbs at the other end are used by adults in public life.

He does not apply it to other systems of signification in the modern world, mainly as his focus is on the narrative. Yet it is fascinating to apply the tool in other areas of culture.

Food, for instance. I am sure a study of what transformation the now ubiquitous 'tandoori chicken' had to go through since its origins in the Punjabi or some other North Indian kitchen before it became standard restaurant fare could provide fascinating insights. Or how for instance,

the South Indian breakfast of idli, dosa ,vade and coffee, which I am told originated in Tamil nadu but was defined and universalized by the restauranteurs from Udupi in Karnataka.

Food is very much a signifier of caste status. What happens to it when it universalizes itself to appeal to the market outside? Why is it that some cuisines make this transition easily while others don't? Until recently for instance the city of the size of Kolkata had no restaurant serving genuine Bengali food. There was I remember a charitable home for women where you had to go for it.

Other areas that come to mind are dress and town-planning. Within my generation the salwar-kameez from the North West of India has invaded homes across India and won the patronage of even Tamil and Malayalee girls. It would be fascinating to know what happened to the details of the dress and the style of wearing it as it shed its association with the Middle East and Islam, and moved on to unrelated geographical and cultural contexts.

Modern technology complicates Ramanujan's linear structure, since it has entered both the domestic and public spheres. The relationship of domestic/folk/tribal music to its transformation into a public commodity has been commented upon by others though rarely within a general theoretical framework. What has happened to the exclusive status of music since it became available for production and consumption to the poorest of the poor through the audio cassette or to the perception of pornography since the world shrank thanks to the mobile phones and cameras are projects waiting to be investigated.

The striking feature of all these explorations of Ramanujan is how he starts with things which were considered small, almost insignificant, such as women's tales or songs, and from there goes on step by step to look at some very important if hitherto ignore aspect of our lived social canvas. He is not contemptuous of the products of the illiterate and the weak, nor is he afraid to look at large issues.

When Raman came to study Indian folklore, the field was dominated by theories of Little and Great traditions. Robert Redfield, the Chicago anthropologist, had said: 'In a civilization, there is a great tradition of the reflective few and there is a little tradition of the largely unreflective many.' Raman's comment on this statement was: 'That is a famous formulation that deserves to be infamous.' To him, all texts and performances are 'a transitive series, a "scale of forms"'

responding to one another, engaged in a continuous and dynamic dialogic relationship.

Texts....are ...contexts and pretexts for other texts.'

To read any essay by Raman, whether on Tamil poetry, Kannada vacanas, oral tales, Bhakti poems, is to become aware of the essential unity of his thought. He manages to weave all these separate strands into the fabric of the entire swathe of Indian culture. One becomes aware of Raman's thought as a coherent 'system, where each genre is related to others, fitted, dovetailed, contrasted ---so that we cannot study any of them alone for long.' []

THE LINGUIST'S INSIGHTS

Raman's essay, 'Where Mirrors are Windows,' argues that 'cultural traditions in India are indissolubly plural and often conflicting but are organized through at least two principles, (a) context-sensitivity and (b) reflexivity of various sorts, both of which constantly generate new forms out of the old ones.' He borrowed the term 'context-sensitive' from linguistics and applied it in his own field to mean phenomena which were modified or even radically altered by the context in which they appeared. [An example of context-sensitivity are the adjectives in Hindi, which change according to the gender of the noun

qualified: *achchha* ladaka, *achchhee* ladaki, *achchhe* ladake, *achchhee* ladakiyan. In English, the adjective is 'context- free': *good* boy, *good* girl etc.] And in his essay, 'Is there an Indian Way of Thinking?' he draws attention to how much in Indian culture that is valuable and living is 'context-sensitive'. Western Civilization has a strong 'context-free' bias: thus moden science seeks universal laws. Western philosophy tries to understand how 'one' knows the world outside, regardless of who the 'one' is. Western ethics is built around the Kantian Categorical Imperative.

Indian culture, on the other hand, is ruled by context-sensitivity. Caste behaviour, for instance, is context-sensitive. Certain castes are allowed to consume particular items of food or wear clothes that are not permitted traditionally to others. In aesthetics, the bhavas, raw emotions, are context-sensitive, private. Rasa is context-free. The three purusharthas (goals of human life: dharma, artha and kama) are relational in all respects. The fourth, moksha, is context free. It is release from all relations.

[Bhakti, to Raman, is the last of the great Hindu anti-contextual notions. It defies all contextual structures, caste, ritual, temples, sacred space, sacred time, the Vedas and the Sastras (systematized knowledge). And within this movement, women defy more structures: gender, and

all that goes with it (notions of modesty, marriage, dependence on men). Once again Raman shows us how close the independent, defiant women of the oral tales are to women in the bhakti movement. You have seen my documentary film, ‘Kanaka-Purandara,’ which draws heavily on Raman’s explication of Bhakti.]

Modernisation in India , argues Raman, has become a movement from the context-sensitive to the context-free . Once ragas were tied to the various times of the day and to the seasons. Today they can be heard at all times.

‘The highly contextualized Hindu systems are generalized into a “Hindu View of Life” by apologists like S. Radhakrishnan for the benefit of both Western and modern Indian readers.’

[This is why it would I think be true to say that Raman is only luke-warm to the Sanskrit textual tradition. Except for the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, which in any case have become part of the regional language traditions through translations and oral language traditions (‘No Hindu ever reads the Mahabharata for the first time,’ goes a famous observation of his), Raman is left largely unmoved by the ‘pan-Indic Sanskrit, the second language of cultured Indians for centuries’. Being pan-Indic, it is context-free. It is rigidly structured and unchanging. Its shastras seek perennial truths.’ And he confesses ‘[at one time] I had felt that Sanskrit itself and all that it represented had become an absence, at best a crippling and not an enabling presence, [and] that the future needed a new past.’

And amazingly he found the new past in the mother-tongue culture. Regardless of what he is discussing, one can always sense in the background the home, teeming with the family, and at its centre, shaping the familial contexts, responding to them in different ways, the presence of the woman.]

ME AS RAMAN’S DISCIPLE

A few years ago the famous theatre director Peter Brook came to India with his writer Jean Claude Carrier to prepare the script for a stage version of the ‘Mahabharata’ and I was asked if I would collaborate. I agreed initially, but then realized that what Brook wanted was a very faithful adaptation of the Sanskrit Mahabharata. I was incapable of such loyalty to the text, since I had grown in a *parampara* where one used the epic as a point of departure for one’s own creativity. Brook honestly accepted that such an attitude would be very risky and possibly

dangerous for him and Carrier, since they were outside the tradition. I therefore withdrew from the project. One could say Brook wanted to treat the text as context-free (which it would have to be to make sense in Europe), while for me the exercise had to be context-sensitive to have any personal value at all.

The only completely context-free text I know are the Vedas: they have to be in Sanskrit, they cannot be translated; it is their phonological structure that is venerated while the semantic is only secondary. Large chunks of the Vedas make no sense to us but are still to be accepted without a change of letter. It is claimed that the recitation of the Vedas has remained unchanged in Kerala or in Varanasi for thousands of years. One couldn't think of a more perfect example of an unchanging, unchangeable text in India. (I suppose the Quran and the Hebrew Bible have a similar status, since they too are inviolable by translation.)

This certainly has not been the case with the epics. Most Indians know the Ramayana and the Mahabharata only in their vernacular versions. They are revered, not only for the words with which they are composed but for what they *mean* to us. You quote a line, a stanza or a passage from them to illuminate a point of conduct in real life. Prof Matilal, who occupied the Radhakrishnan chair at All Souls College, Oxford, says that since in India we do not have a tradition akin to what is called Ethics in the West, it is the central events in the epics and the discourses surrounding them that provide the hub for ethical discussion.

Yakshagana, the traditional theatre form in Karnataka, has, as a part of its performance tradition, an act called Taala-Maddale. Actors sit on stage with no costume or make-up, there is no music or dance. The actors, in their every-day dress, enact a dramatic scene from either of the two epics. When a debate ensues on whether a character was right or wrong in what he did, the ethical implications of the act are rigorously argued with the actors bringing their entire scholarship and familiarity with literature and lore to bear on the discussion. And if the actor playing Duryodhana is capable, he will prove to the audience that he was right in whatever he did and that his opponent, Krishna perhaps, or Yudhishtira, was wrong, regardless of how tradition has understood the situation. The audience applauds and then the performance proceeds as per the original plot. The actors are free to deconstruct the entire tradition attributed to the epics, to redefine the ethical landscape of a scene.

When I was twenty-two, I got the Rhodes Scholarship to go to Oxford and the event gave rise to unexpected tensions within the family. I was the first member of the family to go West and in those days prior to air-travel, someone who went abroad for studies returned home only at the end of the academic course, which often meant after at least a couple of years. My family was afraid that I may marry and settle down abroad, and spared no effort in making it clear to me that they expected me to return home at the end of my studies. I resented this pressure since I was rearing to launch on the new life and go where the world led me. While I was amidst these tensions, I read C. Rajagopalachari's English translation of the Mahabharata and was immediately struck by the myth of Yayati.

King Yayati was cursed to old age because of a sexual transgression he had committed. He asked his sons to accept this curse of old age and give him their youth in exchange, and one of the sons, Pooru, agreed to oblige. Thus Yayati became young again while his son became decrepit and senile. This story provoked me for it seemed to me that my parents too were being equally unreasonable in making demands upon my future, and, suddenly, I found myself writing a play on the theme.

In the myth, Yayati lives for a thousand years and having realized the futility of indulging in the sensual pleasures offered by endless youth, finally returns his youth to his son. While the myth virtually possessed me, I was limited by the form I had chosen, I was writing a play and could not possibly have a scene in it extending over a thousand years. I had to find a device to persuade Yayati of his folly within the two hours at my disposal. So I invented a character, a young bride for Pooru. When she finds that she is facing the un-natural situation of having a senile husband but a youthful father-in-law, she goes to Yayati and demands that since he has taken over the youth for which she married Pooru, he should now accept her too and give her a child. Horrified, he refuses. She commits suicide and Yayati sees for himself the damaging consequences of his abdication of responsibility. Well, the play was written half-a-century ago and is still staged and no one has accused me of desecrating the epic by writing the 301st Mahabharata.

In fact in the middle of the last century, just before I wrote my play, the myth seems to have suddenly inspired many of my older contemporaries. Adya Rangacharya, the Kannada playwright, in his 'Sanjeevani', V. S. Khandekar, the Marathi novelist, in his novel, 'Yayati', Kusumagraj, the Marathi poet, in his play, 'Yayati and Devayani', and several other writers, felt

impelled to tackle the theme. And each one of us had a different reason for tackling the theme and a totally independent interpretation of the myth.

Although the play ‘Oedipus’ is most popular in the version written by Sophocles, Aeschylus too has his own interpretation of the myth and the plot elements in both are totally different from the myth as it appears originally in Homer. In the original myth, Oedipus does not blind himself after discovering the horrible secret at the centre of his life and continues to rule over the kingdom regardless. That is what myths are like.

[Raman died suddenly, under anaesthetic, as he was being wheeled into the operation room for a surgery on his spine. He was 64 years old. It was as he had predicted at the end of his poem, ‘Chicago Zen.’

Watch your step, watch it, I say,
especially at the first high
threshold,

and the sudden low
one near the end
of the flight
of stairs,

and watch
for the last
step that’s never there.

Let me finally explain what qualifies me to talk about Raman at such length when I was not his student.

You have just seen my documentary, *Kanaka-Purandara*. The commentary for the film draws heavily on the Introductions he wrote to his two collections of Kannada and Tamil Bhakti poems. My film, *Cheluvi*, is based on a Kannada folk tale which he had collected (‘The Flowering Tree’). When I was at the University of Chicago and asked to write a play for the students, I didn’t have to look far. I looked through his anthologies of oral tales, chose two, and combined them to concoct *Naga-Mandala*, which is my most oft-produced play in the US. I got interested

in the 11th century Kannada vacana literature because of him. I based my play, *Taledanda*, on the events of that period guided by Ramanujan, and when I translated the play into English, I used his translations of the vacanas. I have a play called *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* ----again it was Raman who first told me that the warrior Tipu Sultan had kept a secret diary of his dreams which he hid under his pillow, even while he was on his campaigns. I can go on. You know, I am sure, of the *akshayapatra*. It refers to a pot which never gets empty however generously you help yourself to its contents. Raman was an *akshayapatra* to me.